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Abstract Subjects: Adia Millett, Abstraction, and the Black Aesthetic Tradition

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Abstract: The Oakland, California-based artist Adia Millett is among an ever-growing generation of Black artists who have embraced abstraction in their creative production. Her approach is significant, considering that one of the more pernicious dimensions of art history has been its omission of African-American painters from the history of late-modernist American abstraction. In this 2024 interview, scholar Derek Conrad Murray and Millett exchange ideas about the intersection of Blackness and abstraction. Identity and representation have always been a thorny terrain throughout the history of American art, from the nineteenth century to the present—and Black artists' commitment to reflecting on racial injustice dubiously rendered their work incommensurate with the aesthetic dictates of post-war abstraction. Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in corrective efforts dedicated to recuperating Black artists who have fallen through the cracks of history. As a result, the twenty-first century has seen an acknowledgment of many artists who were overlooked—and a blossoming of formalist abstraction among recent generations of contemporary Black artists. As articulated in this interview, Adia Millett, like many of her peers, has resisted the falsehood that abstraction is beyond her purview—and has embraced abstraction while refusing to abandon the complexities of Blackness.

Keywords: African-American art; abstraction; identity; representation; art history

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1. Introduction

> Learn to understand existence as being political.
> Avoid art-world strategies.
> Erase all known isms.
> Learn to hate the history of art and, above all, don't trust it.
> Allow the paint as material to take care of the black thing.
> Don't succumb to populist aesthetics.
> Remove the notion of me.
> Eliminate that which qualifies as a narrative.
> Learn to live by the philosophy of jazz.
> Only fools want to be famous (avoid at all cost).
> Remain true to myself.
>
> —Jack Whitten (Whitten and Siegel 2018, p. 251)

For roughly the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in black abstraction. There is a growing list of African-American and African-diasporic artists taking up the genre, including Glenn Ligon, Odili Donald Odita, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Jennie C. Jones, Rashid Johnson, Shinique Smith, David Huffman, Samuel Levi Jones, and Adia Millett among many others. The greater acceptance and inclusion of black abstraction was preceded by a shift in both scholarly discourses and within the art market. In many ways, this was a recuperative effort and an acknowledgment that the history of

American abstraction was rigidly ethno-European. In the past two decades, there have been efforts to acknowledge many of the artists who were overlooked, many of whom were in their late seventies and eighties at the time they began to receive recognition. However, this shift has opened the door for a younger generation of artists to embrace abstraction and find success despite the continued expectation that *blackness* is a visible and culturally legible presence in their work, which so often necessitates the representation of black bodies. It is, therefore, still an iconoclastic and rebellious gesture for artists of African descent to fully embrace abstraction, especially in the United States. In essence, abstraction means liberation, and especially an individuality that has so often been denied black people, either within the dictates of their own ethnic community—or within a society that can only see black people ideologically as a collective underclass.[1]

2. Context

In what follows, I engage in an extended conversation with Oakland-based artist Adia Millett (b. 1975), whom I interview as exemplary of the current generation of African-American abstract painters. (Figure 1) Originally from Los Angeles, Millett received her BFA from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1997 and her MFA from the California Institute of Arts in 2000. Millett's work is a formally complex and conceptually multivarious exploration of the history of black aesthetic expression (Roth 2023). Within the so-called mainstream art world, black artists who appear to refuse the political concerns of race and embrace abstraction or the intellectually esoteric dictates of conceptualism are perceived as more evolved and transcendent than their activist artist peers. As a multi-disciplinary artist and Afrofuturist, Millett is stridently outspoken in her commitment to exploring African-American history while simultaneously exploring the complexities of identity, collective histories, and the incredible resiliency of black people in the United States. However, she has also suggested that her response to the expectation that black artists embrace identity-based art practices was to locate ways to engage with subjectivity without a representational focus on the body.

Millett was included in curator Thelma Golden's paradigm-shifting 2001 exhibition Freestyle held at the Studio Museum in Harlem. *Freestyle* introduced an emerging generation of black artists whose aesthetic and conceptual choices were often iconoclastic, experimental and endeavored to transform and ultimately expand the parameters of what black art can be. (Golden 2001, p. 14) *Freestyle* has emerged as both prophetic and transformative in its support of an irascible group of artists who rallied against the ideological enclosures and confining scripts that have often relegated black art to the margins. The lack of acknowledgment and support of black abstraction was one of those slippages that emerged after the *Freestyle* exhibition, which, in the years since, has arisen as a major arena of creative production for many black artists.

Millett's creative practice embraces various media and conceptual approaches, including stained glass, collage, sculpture, textiles, quilting, installation, and painting. Her abstract painterly works are in critical dialogue with Abstract Expressionism and the Color Field tradition, depicting beautifully composed and complex geometric shapes, vibrant colors, combined with forms that allude to landscapes, architectural structures, and interior spaces. Millett describes her work, specifically her use of textiles as drawing on African-American domestic and artistic traditions of quilt-making, while "paying homage to the past through the use of repurposed fabrics and historical iconography, its bright atheistic imagery is informed by the future" (Millett 2024).

Figure 1. Studio portrait of Adia Millett (2024) [color photograph].

In his review of the artist's exhibition *Adia Millett, Wisdom Keepers* held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose (16 September 2023–18 February 2024), critic Dave Roth rightly addressed the historical problematics of a black artist who chooses abstraction, in a moment when racial antagonisms and anti-blackness are pervasive:

> While matters of aesthetics are often thought to be apolitical, the act of a Black artist making non-representational art during times of crisis has historically been viewed as anti-political, as when orthodoxies imposed by the Black Arts Movement during the Civil Rights era ultimately triggered a backlash against the notion that art should serve only political purposes. (Roth 2023)

Roth ultimately suggests "that art-making, in Millett's scheme of things, isn't so much an individual endeavor as it is a timeless, communal, generation-spanning affair" (Roth 2023). However, in contrast to that sentiment, it is clear that the artist's choice of abstraction

and her engagement with black aesthetic histories is engaged in a cultural politics of both race and gender.

Millett's presence as a woman of color committed to non-objective formal considerations is in direct conversation with a history of exclusion and devaluing, as well as an ongoing conversation about what black artists should or should not do. The epigraph above, for example, comprises excerpted entries from the late African-American painter Jack Whitten's studio logs, which were posthumously published in his 2018 book entitled *Jack Whitten: Notes from the Woodshed* (See Figures 2 and 3). The text, originally written in 1998 when Whitten was 58, is part of a list of 32 objectives that shaped his artistic production. Whitten (1939–2018), in his later years, became synonymous with the art world's neglect of black abstractionists, a historical omission that is just now being redressed. The artist's personal notes revealed the frustrations of a gifted black artist negotiating an exclusionary art world, contrasted by intracultural expectations that demanded that black artists construct a distinctly politicized and recognizably "black" visual aesthetic (O'Grady 2021). In some ways, Whitten's creative values are in alignment with the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, while in other respects, it rejects many of its formalist rigidities. *New York Times* writer Megan O'Grady highlights the difficulty faced by Whitten and many of his African-American contemporaries:

> Art allowed Whitten to bridge the country's racial divides with a practice that embodied the possibility of individual freedom and improvisation within larger social identities. His insistence that painting was *about* something ran counter to—or expanded upon—the Minimalist ideals of the time, which privileged form over meaning ("Erase all known isms"). "Abstract painting that addresses subject is what I want," he wrote. "I want something that goes beyond the notion of the 'formal' as subject." (O'Grady 2021)

Art historians have begun redressing the erasures and rigidities as well. In her essay "African American Abstraction", art historian Sarah Lewis brings critical attention to the seminal writings of Anne Gibson, who "properly considered why African American Abstract Expressionist practices had been 'discounted'", and reflected candidly on her own disturbance upon realizing that, at the time, "no people of color were considered 'major' Abstract Expressionists" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Gibson's exploration into the value systems that subtend the abstract expressionist movement's conceptual and aesthetic criteria was committed to unraveling the genre's rigidities and omissions—while arguing that "the very definition of abstraction as a concept that needed to be dislodged from Greenbergian formalism and influential ideas about "quality" and "presence" that defined it" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Gibson directly challenged the aesthetic criteria that defined Abstract Expressionism, particularly its mythic universalism and its "denial of politics" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Lewis points out that Gibson's work on abstraction indicted the art world's delineation of not just what forms of art matter but also whose lives and creative productions have historical worth. Gibson's scholarship had a profound impact and led to a resurgence of interest in black abstraction.

Much of this conversation is rooted in the legacy and intellectual particularities of the late American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). Greenberg came into prominence as arguably the most influential art critic of his generation and was known for his staunch advocacy of formalism and abstraction in mid-twentieth-century painting. The 1950s was an important time for the intellectual and formal development of art in the United States. The meteoric rise of Abstract Expressionism, spearheaded by Greenberg—along with art critic Harold Rosenberg, art historian Meyer Schapiro, and the art historian and critic Leo Steinberg—brought to the fore new intellectual and aesthetic perspectives that had an indelible impact on post-war American art. Greenberg viewed formalist abstraction as a universal aesthetic that elided socio-political issues, nationalism, and ethnic particularity.[2] He launched several artistic careers, namely those of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and several others. However, Greenberg's rigidity was perceived as elitist and destructive. In many ways, his legacy has been tarnished as a result of his

contentiousness and unwavering advocacy for a very particularized aesthetic criteria—and in the decades since his death, the perception of Greenberg's contributions, have been sutured to a set of annihilative stances, rebukes, and exclusions that not only defined the critics views, but were also perceived as entangled with cultural attitudes of the period. Moreover, the overdetermining of Abstract Expressionism as an exclusively Euro-American (and primarily male) artistic movement, has (for better, or worse) continued to define the critics legacy. Sarah Lewis's recuperation of Anne Gibson's critical reassessment of Greenberg's interventions gives much needed recognition to many of the artists who ultimately (for reasons still being debated) were not recognized.

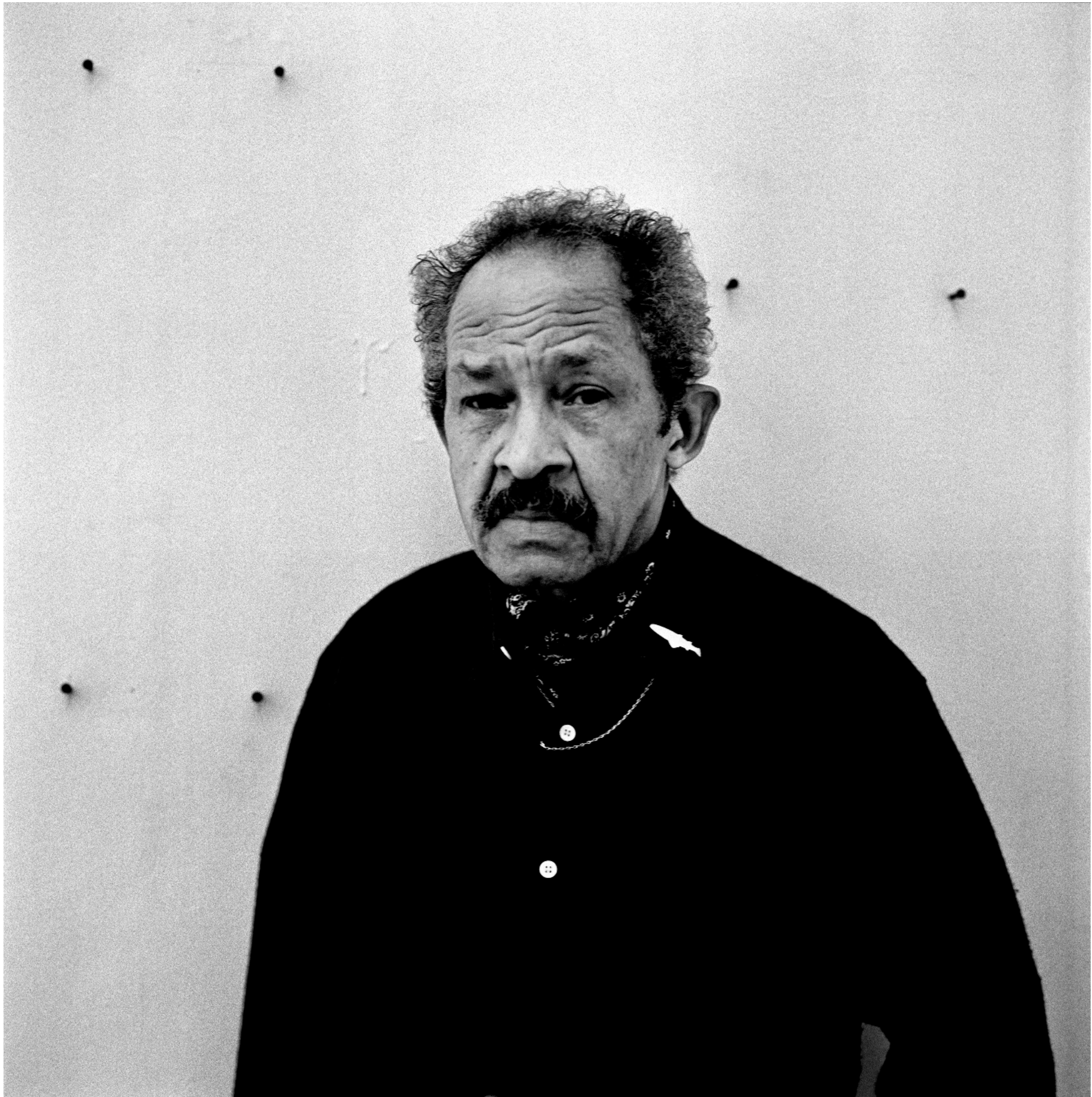

Figure 2. Anton Corbijn, *Jack Whitten, Self-Assignment*, 24 January 2017. New York, NY—January 24: painter and sculptor Jack Whitten poses for a portrait on 24 January 2017, in New York, NY. (Photo by Anton Corbijn/Contour by Getty Images).

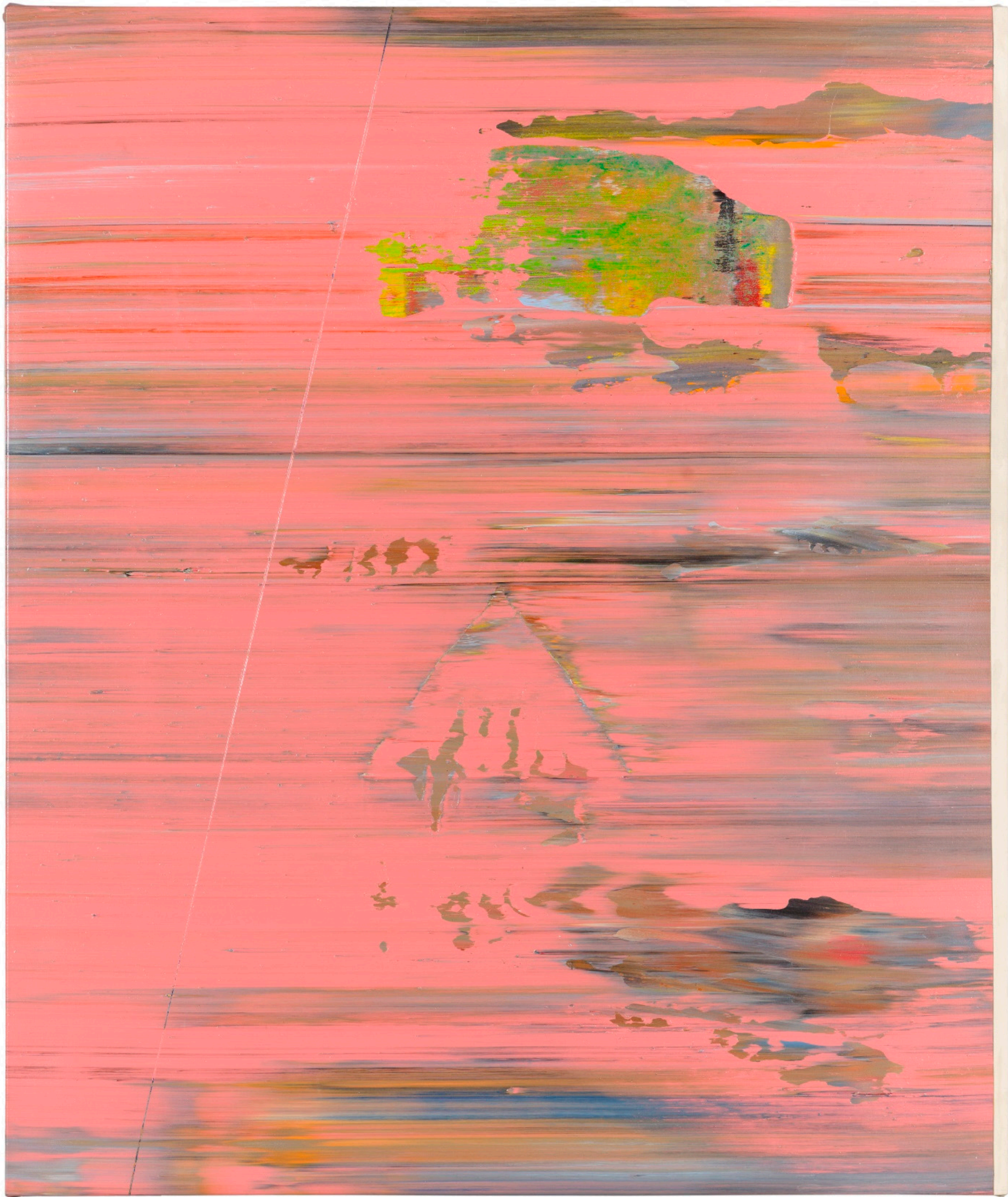

Figure 3. Jack Whitten, *Pink Psyche Queen*. 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 71 × 60 in. (180.3 × 152.4 cm). Gift of Mary and Earle Ludgin by exchange. 2012.14. Photo: Nathan Keay. © Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy of the Estate and Hauser & Wirth, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL.

As a key exemplar, Lewis recalls the groundbreaking 2006 exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem entitled *Energy/Experimentation*. The exhibition focused on the creative experimentation of black artists during the Black Arts Movement between the 1960s and 1970s. Many were working abstractly during a time when the emphasis was on representational practices that were reflective of political concerns—and which were in direct

contradistinction to the representational tenets of late-modernist abstraction. The contrast between political engagement and the supposedly liberatory universality of abstraction emerged as a clear (and at times fraught) dividing line between black artists. Many African-American non-objective painters found themselves ignored by the arts established, yet similarly alienated by the black arts community for apparently failing to directly and representationally reflect the revolutionary aesthetics of black pride. It was clear that during the Black Arts Movement, there was an expectation placed on black artists that they must produce art that "speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (O'Grady 2021).

The demand to reflect the struggle against structural racism and anti-blackness primarily took the form of figuration and realist depictions of black subjects—often historical figures—and those engaged with activism and resistance. In a limited sense, black abstraction gained some acknowledgment from the mainstream art world—while simultaneously being perceived as adrift from the political dynamism and revolutionary politics of the Black Arts Movement. It was a vexing predicament for many artists, many of whom were resistant to the very notion of a segregated place for black artists.

The abstract painter Norman Lewis struggled to reconcile the intracultural creative demands placed upon his identity while attempting to remain faithful to abstraction (See Figures 4 and 5). Lewis is an important exemplar and antecedent to the current resurgence of interest in abstraction among contemporary black artists and scholars. Lewis was a contemporary of *The Irascibles*, a group of 18 American abstract painters that were associated with the New York School, a group of multi-genre artists during the 1950s and 60s. The artists, many of whom were proteges of Clement Greenberg, would famously appear in a group portrait in *Life* magazine's January 15, 1951 issue—a moment that launched the Abstract Expressionist movement to international notoriety. Lewis often patronized the Cedar Tavern, a bar and restaurant in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, NY, which served as a hub for a diverse range of artists. Lewis was a mainstay among the New York School but found himself alienated from the Abstract Expressionist movement as it came into national and international prominence. He became a casualty of the Greenbergian aesthetic criteria that was so limiting that it excluded a range of artists, primarily ethnic and sexual minorities (Landau 2005, p. 70). A first-generation abstract expressionist, Lewis was a founding member of *Spiral*, a select group of black painters working in New York during the 1960s, which included artists Romare Bearden, Emma Amos, Hale Woodruff, Charles White, and many others. As the only African-American abstract expressionist, it has been widely noted—if not mythologized—that Lewis was actively excluded by the major progenitors of the abstract movement. In his critical reassessment of the artistic movement, David Craven suggests that "Perhaps it is not surprising that the one major Abstract Expressionist who was black would be the one member of the group who has been consistently ignored in accounts of this period in U.S. art" (Craven 2005, p. 515).

The list of black abstractionists is lengthy and comprises a diverse, multigenerational group of gifted yet under-recognized artists with diverse views, including the aforementioned Lewis, Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas, William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Howardena Pindell, Martin Puryear, McArthur Binion, Charles Alston, Beauford Delaney, Al Loving, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Afro-British painter Frank Bowling, and Ed Clark. While it is clear that the cultural racism of the period led to the widespread marginalization of black abstractionists, we cannot afford to overlook how the Civil Rights Movement and the legal fight to end racial segregation necessitated a culture of creative resistance that compelled black artists to commit themselves to the cause. Refusing to do so—or simply resisting any mandate that would control or curtail one's creative freedom—often led to a social and professional death.

In her *New York Times* article, Megan O'Grady underscores the historical and present-day reality that "the license to free expression that white artists have been granted by birthright—especially white male artists, so often perceived as the vanguard in visual arts—hasn't been available to Black artists" (O'Grady 2021).

Figure 4. Arnold Newman, portrait of American artist Norman Lewis (1909–1979) as he poses in his Harlem studio, New York, New York, 5 February 1960. (Photo by Arnold Newman Properties/Getty Images).

The expectation that black artists would create representational art that reflects the black experience continued to resonate throughout the 1960s, and is vividly addressed in Whitten's writing. The 1963 killing of four girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, his hometown, touched off a long period of rage, anxiety and existential questioning. For Whitten and other black artists of his generation, abstraction was something of a lonely course, one that set them apart from the Black Arts Movement. Early in her career, the painter and video artist Howardena Pindell was famously told by the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem to "go downtown and show with the white boys" when she shared with him her abstract work, which also failed to adhere to the feminist narrative of the time. Pindell was certainly not alone in her frustration with having her work perceived solely through her race or gender (O'Grady 2021).

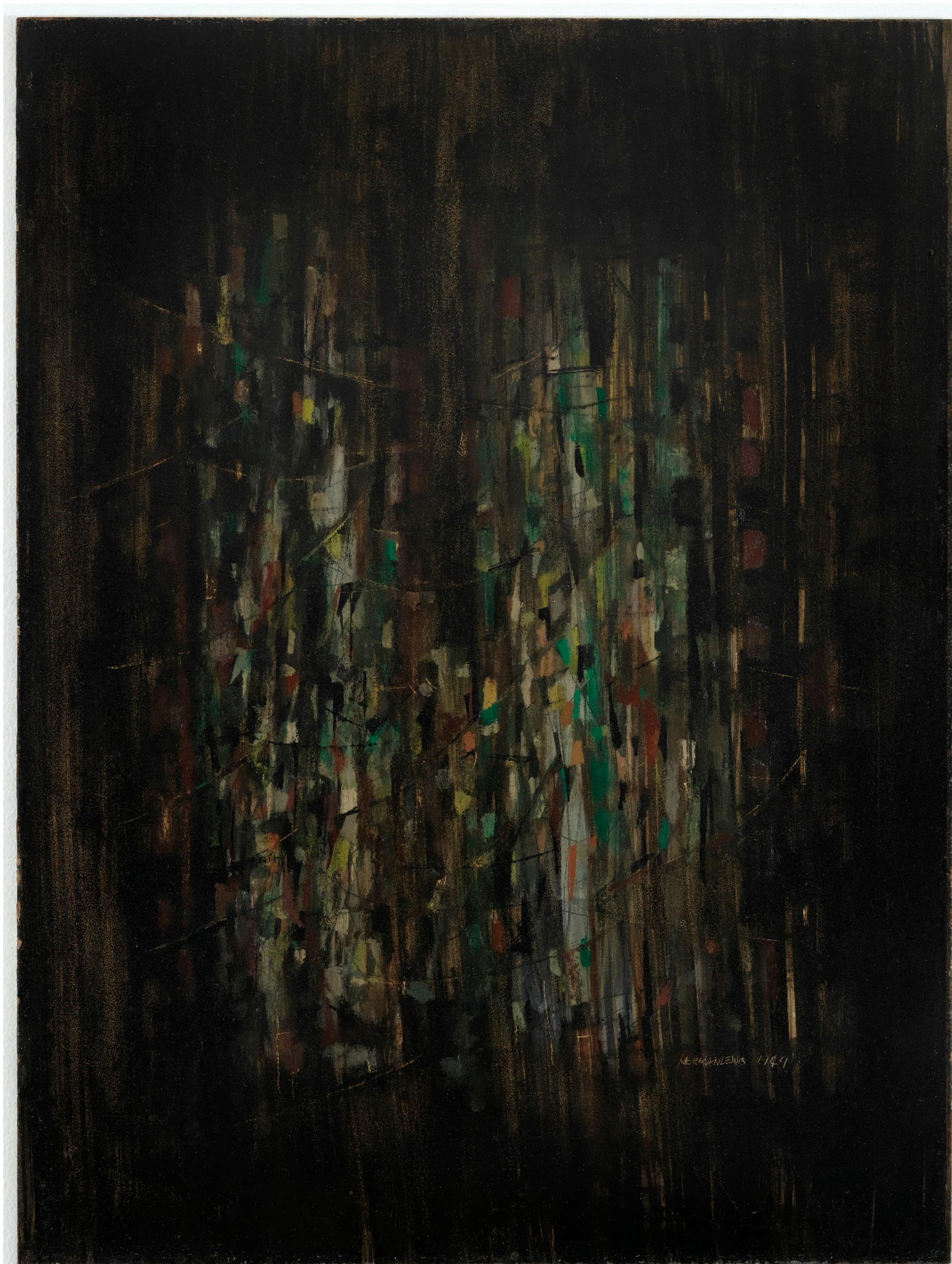

Figure 5. Norman Lewis, *City Night*. 1949. Oil on wood, 24 × 18 in. (61 × 45.7 cm). Gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Location: The Museum of Modern Art/New York, NY/USA. © Estate of Norman Lewis, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Howardena Pindell being told to "go downtown and show with the white boys", perfectly encapsulates a double bind faced by black abstractionists: a predicament where they find themselves being perceived by their own community as blind or indifferent towards to the struggle against anti-blackness, while, at the same time, they are rejected by the abstractionist community for their artistic commitment to the struggle against structural racism. In more annihilating and judgmental instances, they were often characterized by other black artists as living under the veil of white supremacy—or as too enamored with white cultural aesthetics. On the other hand, any semblance of the political rendered their work incommensurate with the aesthetic and formal criteria that esoterically defined abstraction as a genre, rendering it intentionally exclusive and unreachable for many. All of these challenges were, needless to say, exacerbated by overtly racist and exclusionary attitudes in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s.

Scholar Leigh Raiford has taken up this contentious predicament, characterizing it as a type of containment, or an ideological enclosure, that restricts the creative possibilities of black creativity. The stakes are bigger than visual art alone. The very understanding of black humanity hangs in the balance. It is a battle for individuality and personhood; it is about the freedom to exist as an autonomous individual and more than just social symbolism—or merely as an avatar for reductive notions of black victimhood:

> Let me offer two distinct but interrelated ways that I am thinking about abstraction in relation to the representation of Black life: first as a specifically aesthetic problematic and second as a legal and theoretical category—that is, the concept of abstract personhood. The *longue durée* of Black representation has often been cast as one of ongoing and uninterrupted struggle, a now hidden, now open fight between abjected Black subjects, banished to the margins of affirming representational forms (like portraiture) . . .
>
> . . . In this history, Black peoples have invested in the "positive image"—the True, the Good, the Beautiful—as a means of gaining social equity and recognition as well as reprieve from the prison house of representation. In the realm of the visual, all that was required were successful images that defeated a seemingly endless march of images of failed Blackness. Black representation is understood, then, as doing specifically political work, uplift work. And thus, figuration—in the form of portraiture or sculpture, for example—has been central to this sort of representational project. (Raiford 2020, p. 80)

Raiford forcefully takes on a representational problem that has divided black artists and intellectuals for decades. Throughout my scholarly career, I have contemplated how African-American artists become ideologically sutured to a limited set of racialized scripts and reductive cultural and representational tropes that are reflective of victimhood, pathology, violence, and struggle. On the other hand, black artists have historically faced intracultural pressures to produce work that reflects the struggle against anti-blackness which, by extension, placed limitations on the creative expressiveness of certain artists—especially those committed to abstraction. The current generation of black artists working abstractly appears to reject the implication that their work should inherently reflect struggle, which differentiates them from the past. In their work is an unabashed embrace of formalism, albeit without a conflicted relationship to the cultural politics of race. For many of these artists, there is little distinction between art, politics, and identity.

Over the past two decades, Millett has created an intriguing and formally multifarious body of work that operates in deep awareness of the history I have outlined above. Between March and May 2024, I had the pleasure of engaging her in conversation about her creative and philosophical engagement with abstraction.

3. Interview with Adia Millett

Author: Before we begin, I would like to thank you for agreeing to have this conversation with me. I've followed your work for many years, and it's been genuinely enriching to watch it evolve formally and conceptually. For the purpose of introducing readers to the

particulars of your artistic career, I would like to begin with your creative history. How did you get started as an artist? Were you raised in a creative household or exposed to visual art by other means?

Adia Millett: Creativity is definitely in the blood. My grandmother, who died when my mother was a child, was an art teacher. My mother studied art in college but never pursued it. My stepfather studied architecture, and my birth father was an actor who, before he passed, took up painting. I would sneak out of my classes in high school to hang out with my art teachers. When I went to UC Berkeley, I took one art class, and there was no turning back. I think most of the artists I know have always felt alien; even in the community, they were different. Sometimes, our circumstances force us to be creative, for example, being a child of immigrants, of parents who struggle with mental illness or addiction, being a child who faces economic, racial, or gender discrimination, etc. In my case, both of my fathers were black, and my mother white. In the 80s and 90s, "mixed kids" were constantly questioned about their identity. As for most nonwhite people in America, the projections of who and what we are were and still are endless. It wasn't until college that I realized this and began to dissect what that meant for me.

Author: I would like to follow up with you regarding your art school experience. I completed a BFA at Art Center College of Design in the 90s, and I was struck by how little information I was given about black art, in general. At the time, artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson, Lyle Ashton Harris, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall, Dawoud Bey, and many others were gaining traction in the art world—yet their work was never taught. There was also a vibrant discourse among black scholars who were critically concerned with their artwork. It was an exciting moment, but it also served as an inspiration for me despite the institution's neglect. The lack of any pedagogical or historical interest in African-American art at my institution was ultimately what led me to pursue graduate studies in art history. What was your experience like studying art on the undergraduate level at UC Berkeley and eventually during your graduate study at the California Institute of the Arts? Did you have a similar experience, or was there a more robust engagement with black art and/or a critical interest in identity and representation? Were you able to find a supportive community?

AM: The undergrad art department at UC Berkeley in the mid-90s offered very little in terms of exposing us to black artists. I had more luck taking ethnic studies classes or June Jordan's poetry class in search of African-American creative practices. Cal Arts was better. Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris came to visit while I was there, offering advice that would help shape myself and the two other black MFA candidates (Figure 6).

Author: As you said, our circumstances often fuel our creativity. Underrecognized people can become sutured to their bodies (and everything that means ideologically in our culture), and by extension—we're often constrained by a limiting set of stereotypes and reductions or find ourselves and our work fetishized. The concern is always that misperceptions about who we are tend to limit our possibilities or at least create a reductive set of understandings about what we can do—or define what our creative and intellectual role is. Can you say more about how your identity became an important area of interest for you during your graduate studies? Were there any experiences you had (creatively, educationally, or personally) that were particularly impactful?

AM: Looking back as young visual artists, writers, and musicians, we were being influenced and exposed to imagery and training that encouraged us to be proud and critical of the cultural tropes that were embedded in our lives. So you saw a lot of young black artists making work about black hair, about the leftover traces of Mammy imagery, and slave ship references, etc. And for black artists working beyond the body, the body and all the layers of who we were had to be a part of our work in order to do anything else. In other words, I was constantly thinking about how my work was both constrained and uplifted by its placement within blackness.

Author: When I first encountered your recent paintings, I was struck by your engagement with abstraction. Historically, the abstract expressionist movement that emerged in

the 1950s was critically framed as an escape from identity and representation in painting. In American art criticism and historiography, there has traditionally been a separation between the formal dimensions of art and the rise of identity-based artistic practices from the 1960s through the 90s. Black artists have always worked abstractly but have not always been acknowledged for doing so. Historically, African-American art has been more figurative—though, in recent years, there has been a distinct leaning toward abstraction among black artists. Why have you made the decision to work abstractly, and how do the broader concerns of identity factor into your conceptual and aesthetic approach?

AM: I'll start by saying that in the 90s, when identity-based work was almost expected from black artists, I began to wonder how I could speak to not just blackness but the larger conversation of the "subject" without including a figure or a literal body. I drank the Kool-Aid of academia and was influenced by Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Hal Foster, Susan Stewart, etc.

While my early work used objects and space to suggest a narrative, I was constantly trying to ride the line between imagery that suggested cultural representation and the removal of that representation. In other words, how could I create an environment that would lead a viewer to their own story, which could be completely different for the next viewer? How could I force the viewer to acknowledge their own projections? I believed that as artists, dismantling how we are defined was our responsibility.

Figure 6. Graduate school image of Millett with artist Lorna Simpson, curator Eungie Joo, and curator and critic Claire Tancons [black and white photograph].

As the years progressed, I noticed that, on an unconscious level, artists reveal who they are through their work, whether they like it or not. Our obsessions, our politics, or trauma inform our work in the most blatant and subtle ways. I could no longer focus on challenging viewers' perceptions of me and definitely not of a whole race of people. So, the work progressively transitioned. I started out focusing on the absence of the body. The domestic space, the home, and the everyday objects were the focal points. Even at this point, I saw the objects and spaces as a collection of collective memories collaged together. Eventually, the "Home" came apart. It seemed like a façade for who a person, a character, or an identity was. I stopped making the miniatures. Only traces of them remained. And everything I made continued to center around the "coming apart." Quilts, structures, photos, and eventually paintings and glass were all made to be deconstructed (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Your Edges and Mine*, 2018, fabric/textiles—old quilt-repurposed fabric, cotton/poly blend, wool 70 in. × 80 in.

At this point, what I see is that, as viewers, we find meaning in anything. A simple circle becomes a sun, moon, target, portal, mouth, and anus. As a black artist, every shape has the potential to be so much more. When you create clearly representational, figurative black art, the meaning is straightforward. You share a vision that we can all agree on, *or so we think*. With abstraction, nonwhite artists hold up a mirror. In 2024, we are not just humans; we are our past, our ancestorial trauma, and seen through the lens of our oppressors.

The question I asked as I completed the work for my latest exhibition, *Reflections on Black*, was this: "Can a Black woman create a body of work about blackness and it not be about race?"

Author: I am very curious about the motivations that fueled your impulse to remove the figure. It's so true that in the 90s—and still today—centering identity-based concerns (structural racism, trauma, struggle, and deprivation) was demanded of black artists. However, many (if not most) black artists willingly choose to foreground anti-blackness in their artistic production—which so often seems to necessitate foregrounding the black body. It is clearly a choice to engage directly with black cultural politics. Beyond your own creative choices, do you feel that black artists should forgo representation (and experiment with abstraction) as a means to broaden cultural understandings of what blackness is? I do agree with you that it is the responsibility of black cultural producers to challenge racist

misperceptions of who we are. From your perspective, is the abstract gesture a productive means to accomplish that aim, or are there other representational strategies? To that point, do you make any attempt in your abstract works to produce forms that function as visually recognizable signifiers for blackness?

AM: I'll start with the last question. In my process of creating abstract work, I will often start with a series of shapes connected to a story or symbol that is a signifier of blackness *for me*, i.e., a fist, a boat, a spear, but those objects are so open-ended and sometimes you can barely see them. I'm not spelling "my" story out with the assumption that it belongs to everyone. Is it our responsibility to challenge racist misperceptions of who we are? Each artist has a unique life experience; therefore, our responsibilities are not all the same (Figure 8).

Figure 8. *Visionary*, 2023, acrylic on wood panel(s), 3 wood panels, 59 ¾ in. × 40 in. each (59 ¾ in. × 120 in. total).

When will we get to the point when people are asking black abstractionists the same questions they are asking white abstractionists? Will we ever? The body is an incredible aspect of who we are, but it is not all of who we are. Too often do I see beautiful paintings of black men and women without names, an unnamed figure meant to represent all of us. What I believe that says to the nonblack viewer is, "Continue to see each of us as a general black figure." I think the black body should absolutely remain a part of our visual conversation, but as soon as we see ourselves perpetuating a myth of who we are, we need to ask ourselves how we can expand the limitations of our own identities. For me, abstraction does that; it says I will not be limited by anything or anyone while continuing to be black AF:)

Author: I'm interested in the strategy you are suggesting, which is mobilizing abstraction to combat generalized notions about blackness. In many ways, some of the most core conversations around abstraction have been connected to notions of purity (of form) and universality. So, using abstraction to push against myths of who we are is a really provocative strategy. Can you talk a little more about how you think abstraction can play a useful role in recasting or even breaking tired tropes? And are there artists (past or present) who have been really inspirational to you in terms of cracking through to something new?

AM: Abstract visual art is like Jazz; we're creating languages to extend our voices and foster connections within and beyond our culture. I don't know if I believe anything is truly pure but universal; perhaps everything is. There are certain terms that differ so much from

one person to the next, for example, God or love. I think blackness does the same thing. There are endless ways to understand blackness. Abstraction is one way of extending the way we define anything we want (Figure 9). The advantage and disadvantage of being black is that everything we do and create becomes a representation of who we are. There are lots of artists who, I believe, use abstraction to expand representation in this way. Jack Whitten, Alma Thomas, William T. William, Joe Overstreet, Odili Donald Odita, Shinique Smith, there are so many.

Figure 9. *Three Ladies*, 2024, acrylic and spray paint on wood 40 in. × 40 in.

As far as artists who have been really inspirational, David Hammons and Lorna Simpson. David has always had the ability to create mirrors. His work is visually stunning, simple, and gritty while forcing the viewer to look at themselves. He somehow makes fun of us while educating us. Lorna made me think about the black body and investigate all the assumptions we make. It was her work that challenged me to create spaces without

figures. Even with very little form, we find meaning, and if we can't find it in the art, we will look for it in the identity of the artist.

Author: I would like to pivot to discuss your latest exhibition at the Haines Gallery, *Adia Millett: Reflections on Black*. I'm interested in the relationship between blackness and moonlight. Why is this relationship important to you creatively . . . And how do you see a connection between the lived realities of African Americans, identity, and your personal relationship to blackness?

AM: On a personal level, the moon is a family member and the object in the world that I most identify with. As it connects to blackness, the moon is a reflective surface that gives shadows and blackness a space to be revealed. The moonlight gives us a unique perspective of the world, rich and vivid. And that only touches the surface of what the moon does. It impacts the gravitational field of our planet, our seasons, our agriculture, and our mental and emotional well-being. My personal relationship to blackness is reflected in my art. And the lived realities of African Americans are not something that can be summed up in even a lifetime of words. Like everyone, I have numerous opinions regarding what it means to be black and observations of what the cultural distinctions between us and them are. But I hope that we are all self-aware enough to challenge even the most blatant assumptions; if not, we'll continue to perpetuate a world that lacks empathy and equality (Figure 10).

Figure 10. *The Unseen*, 2024, acrylic on wood, 48 in. × 60 in.

Author: You stated that you're interested in creating work that explores blackness without directly engaging with race. I really love that idea, and there is a similar conversation in scholarship around the notion of black liquidity (Raengo 2017, pp. 8–13). The discourse explores the intersection between blackness and aesthetics, contemplating how blackness often exists culturally in a manner that is detached from bodies and legible discussions of race. There is a growing interest in the notion that blackness exists ideologically in form, materiality, aesthetics, and aurally, even as the legible markers of racial identity are not readily visible. Do you see your work as being in conversation with these ideas?

AM: Yes. My hope is that someday, when people identify something as being "Black," it won't be about race; it will be defining something that encapsulates wisdom, innovation, power, comradery, and truth. . . with its roots found in us as a people.

Author: I would love to hear your thoughts on African-American history, especially the black aesthetic tradition. How do you engage with it, and what does it mean to you creatively? Has African-American art history (I'm thinking about the Black Arts Movement) served as an important inspiration? In the 1970s, there was a sentiment among the black arts community that African-American art should be visibly engaged in the struggle against anti-blackness. To not directly do so was to be perceived as taking an apolitical stance. Is this at all a concern for you?

AM: We all have different ways of speaking to a movement, and I believe that black abstractionists were fighting against anti-blackness in the 70s just as much as everyone else. Our power comes from our ability to not be put into a box.

Author: Can you unpack your interest in glass and quilting traditions within African-American culture?

AM: Your question about African-American history, especially the black aesthetic tradition, is directly tied to African-American quilting. The quilts of the 19th and 20th centuries are so rich with the black experience and were not constricted by the restraints and judgment of the art world. Each piece is not only a work of art but a story. The resources, materials, and community that go into this art form are tremendous (See Figures 11 and 12)!

Author: Where do you think the energy is when you look to the future of African-American art? Are there particular challenges that black artists are facing today that need to be addressed?

AM: Technology, social media, and our expanding culture of narcissism seem to be impacting us all. I do think that since George Floyd, black artists are getting recognized significantly more. Hopefully, this is not simply a trend but a marker of a more important shift that we need to move forward as a collective. The consistent concern throughout time continues to be how our history remains relevant. I must admit that at this point in my life, I'm more concerned with the culture of black farming and creating self-sustaining communities for black folks than I am about what we see in museums and galleries.

Figure 11. *Quilted Warrior Air*, 2023, cotton, wool, duck feathers, 74 in. × 52 in.

Figure 12. *Cosmic Code*, 2022, quilted fabric, 78 in. × 104 in.

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Notes

1. There is a robust and ever-growing body of scholarship on black abstraction. For additional reading, please see the following: Gibson (1991); Bowling and Jones (2006); Mercer (2006); Shaw and Powell (2014); Powell (2014, pp. 1–19); English (2007, 2016); Harper (2015); Enwezor (2017); Beckwith (2017); Crawford (2018); Martin (2019); Jenkins (2022).
2. For an in-depth discussion of Clement Greenberg's formalism relative to the politics of identity, see Gibson (1997). Gibson's text explores how the universal abstraction advocated by critics Harold Rosenberg, Donald Judd, Michael Fried, and Greenberg marginalized artists that fell beyond the confines of white, heterosexual masculinity. In other words, it was not the aesthetic of "one gender, one color, and one sexual preference" that it was professed to be. Of the most notable artists believed to have been overlooked was African-American abstractionist Norman Lewis. Gibson explores Lewis' contribution to the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, paying particular attention to the artist's well-documented explication of his chosen aesthetic in relation to his experience as a black American in the forties and fifties.

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